

CHANGING NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE: SELECTED SABAH SHORT STORIES FROM THE 1980S TO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

*(Mengubah Lanskap Naratif: Cerpen Sabah Terpilih
1980-an hingga Alaf Baharu)*

Norsuhaila Sulaiman
suhailasulaiman32@yahoo.com

*Sim Chee Cheang
susansimcc@yahoo.com

Asmiaty Amat
asmiaty@ums.edu.my

Faculty of Humanities, Arts & Heritage,
University Malaysia Sabah.

Published online: 5 December 2019

To Cite: Norsuhaila Sulaiman, Sim Chee Cheang and Asmiaty Amat.
(2019). Changing Narrative Landscape: Selected Sabah Short Stories
from the 1980s to the New Millenium. *Malay Literature*, 32(2), 239-
256.

Abstract

This article aims to highlight the changes in Sabah Malay literature by scrutinizing the changing thematic treatment and narrative styles in a selected number of short stories published in the literary magazine, *Wadah*, which are strategically published from the 1980s until today. *Wadah* is a Malay literary magazine that was initiated by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah in 1986 and is designed to encourage the growth of the Malay language and literature. Through a critical analysis of the narrative styles of six short stories—namely Azmah Nordin’s “Lumbai” (1987), Jonathan Kandok’s “Mimpi

Burubut” (1988), Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim’s “Lapik Pinang” (1994), Kathrina Tahti’s “Sogit” (2000), Juri Durabi’s “Aur Sungai & Tebing” (2017) and Chacho Muhama’s “Atap Nipah” (2017)—the changing treatment of a particular recurring theme and characters in these stories will contribute to a better understanding of the development of Sabah Malay literature as part of a wider scope of Malaysian literature. The short story genre is selected based on the sustaining productivity of the selected authors and their technical contribution to the development of the particular genre. Apart from uncovering the development of Sabah Malay literature through a structural review of the selected short stories produced from the 1980s to the 2000s this research article exposes the social political influences that have shaped Sabah Malay literature in the development of Malay literature.

Keyword: Sabah Malay Literature, *Wadah*, short stories 1980-2017, local colour

Abstrak

Makalah ini bertujuan menyingkap perubahan Kesusasteraan Melayu di Sabah dengan meneliti tema dan gaya naratif bagi beberapa cerpen terpilih yang terbit dalam majalah Wadah, yang diterbitkan dari tahun 1980-an hingga hari ini. Wadah ialah majalah kesusasteraan Melayu yang diasaskan oleh Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka pada tahun 1986 dan direka untuk menggalakkan pertumbuhan bahasa dan sastera Melayu. Daripada analisis kritis terhadap enam cerpen gaya naratif oleh Azmah Nordin Lumbai (1987), Jonathan Kandok’s “Mimpi Burubut” (1988), Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim’s “Lapik Pinang” (1994), Kathrina Tahti’s “Sogit” (2000), Juri Durabi’s “Aur Sungai & Tebing” (2017) and Chacho Muhama’s “Atap Nipah” (2017) perubahan terhadap tema dan watak yang sering muncul menyumbangkan pemahaman yang lebih baik terhadap pembinaan sastera Melayu sebagai sebahagian daripada Kesusasteraan Malaysia. Cerpen ini dipilih berdasarkan kemapanan penulis dalam penulisannya dan sumbangan mereka dalam genre tertentu. Selain meneliti perkembangan kesusasteraan di Sabah melalui pendekatan berstruktur cerpen tahun 1980-an hingga alaf 2000 kajian ini memaparkan pengaruh sosiopolitik yang membentuk sastera Melayu Sabah dalam perkembangan kesusasteraan Melayu.

Kata kunci: kesusasteraan Melayu Sabah, Wadah, Cerpen 1980-2017, warna tempatan

INTRODUCTION

The rise of modern Malay literature in Borneo, Sabah, in particular began with short stories written by the post-Merdeka writers of the 1960s and 1970s. This was quickly replaced by the modern Malay literary troupe that comprised the likes of K. Bali, Amil Jaya, Zaiton Ajamain, Sairah Hj. Antin, R Hamzah Dua, Harun Haji Salleh and Yaakob Nasroh (Zahba, 1989). During this era, these writers, along with many more, published more than 1000 short stories in local presses such as *Daily Express*, *North Borneo News*, *New Sabah Times* and literary magazines such as *Sinar Usia*, *Bahasa*, *Utusan Rakyat*, *Api-Api* and *Fajar Sabah* (Ismail *et al.*, 2005). Works such as Bismal Yusof's "Missing Dad & Mother"—which was the first short story published in *North Borneo News* and *Sabah Times* on 26th June 1954—and Teruna Lara Sandakan's (Harun) "Siti Janda Muda" (1954) (Asmiaty, 2010, p. 145) are examples of reflections of Sabah society at a specific point in time. Short stories by Emha Sabah, Zai (Zaini Isa), Ismail Abbas, K. Bali and Mujapandi (Ismail *et al.*, 1995, pp. 5-6) were identified as part of the early writers of Borneo Malay literature in the Malay language. Eventually, Borneo literature developed with the help of private bodies such as Angkatan Gaya Baru (AGABA), Sabah Writers Association (Persatuan Penulis-Penulis Sabah) (PERPESA), Sabah Malay Letters (Angkatan Persuratan Melayu Sabah) (APMS) and Sabah Language Body (Badan Bahasa Sabah) (BAHASA) (Ismail, 2005).

When discussing the changes in Sabah's Malay literature, the social and political history of its people are influences that cannot be denied. In her book entitled *Mediasi dalam Perkembangan Novel Sabah* (2019), Asmiaty underlines the need to include the spheres of influence on production mediation in the arts, specifically by focusing on the socio-historical factors. This was first introduced by Wolff (1993), whose theory included taking into account the technological advancement as well as the reigning artistic influence of an age when appreciating a work of art. Ungku Maimunah's model of critical appreciation in the field of sociological appreciation expands on Wolff's model to include the conditions, ideology and institutes (1997) that influence the creation of fiction. As such, the turbulent political history of the formation of Malaysia in 1963, six years after independence from Britain, is indubitably a component that influenced the kind of literature produced by Sabahan writers. Since the first election in 1970 after the formation of Malaysia on 16th September 1963, Sabah was governed by both the United Sabah

National Organization (USNO), a party led by Datu Mustapha, and United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO), led by Donald Stephens; both parties were separated by differences in ethnicity, religion and language (Sabihah, 1986). While UNKO had more English-speaking members of the Catholic faith, USNO had more Muslims who were in favour of the Malay (*bahasa Melayu*). Aside from the differences in faith and language, Sabah has 72 different ethnic groups (Museum Sabah, 2007) speaking 50 different languages or dialects (Combrink *et al.*, 2008). These differences are not officially recognized in the National Census, which acknowledges the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Kadazandusun and Murut ethnic groups while the rest are subsumed under the category of “*lain-lain*” (Sabah Statistics Department, 2019). The ethnic differences precipitating cultural differences, along with different faiths and languages, led to attempts at finding a common language, an issue that the ensuing political party, Sabah People’s United Front (BERJAYA), hoped to achieve after winning the 1976 Sabah state elections. Badan Bahasa dan Sastra (BAHASA) was set up with the sole purpose to unite the people through the acknowledgement of Malay language as the official language of Sabah. On 4th August 1970, a seminar was held in which representatives from Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and Persatuan Penulis Nasional (PENA) acknowledged the objectives of the body, which included a literary growth in Malay language (Asmiaty, 2019).

Other steps were taken to strengthen the development of Borneo Malay literature, in particular the Sabah writers, through the establishment of the Sabah Writers Association (Ikatan Penulis Sabah) (IPS) under the aegis of writer Jasni Matlani. More importantly, the establishment of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah (DBPCS) in 1978 proceeded to hold writing workshops, short story writing competitions and programs aimed to provide training and guidance for Sabahan writers to improve their creative writing skills. As most did not have formal training as a writer, the sharing and disclosure of knowledge in these workshops with counselors from West Malaysia, such as Othman Puteh, encouraged the writers. Most of the works were then published in *Wadah* magazine. To encourage a higher quality of writing, the Sabah Literary Prize was introduced for the first time in 1989. Subsequently, DBPCS developed an initiative that would encourage the growth of Malay language and literature, which is the introduction of a special literary magazine called *Wadah* (Kasima, 2015), which was established in 1986 and still remains in publication.

Another component that catapulted Sabah Malay literature, especially the short story genre, is the role played by newspapers such as *Utusan Kinabalu*, *Sinar Usia*, *Mingguan*, *Fajar Sabah*, *Utusan Rakyat*, *Borneo Post*, *Borneo Mail* and *Utusan Kinabalu* (Asmiaty, 2019, p. 106). They helped to publish the first short stories written by Sabahans. Nonetheless, Bismal Yusof's first short story entitled "Kehilangan Ayah dan Ibu" [Losing Father & Mother] in the June 1954 issue of the *North Borneo News & Sabah Times* and Harun Salleh's "Kakak Siti Janda Muda" published in July 1954 issue are by authors who relocated from West Malaysia (Ismail Abbas *et al.*, 1995, pp. 5-6). The role played by these dailies were important as it was the impetus that encouraged the growth of Sabahan writers such as Azizah Lakim or Zahati, who wrote "Nasihat dari Kawan" [Advice from a Friend], which was published in 1956 in *North Borneo & Sabah Times*. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, Sabah Malay literature grew under the initiative of editors in these dailies, which were mostly written either in English (such as *North Borneo News*) in Sandakan or three different languages, namely English, Malay and Kadazandusun (such as *Sabah Times*). The tasks of implementing and encouraging the growth of Borneo Malay Literature then fell into the hands of DBPCS from the late 1970s.

The analysis focuses on the prevalent themes, structure and narrative style using textual analysis in order to determine the literary identity markers of early Sabah Malay literature. The influences of the changing social and political backdrop in which these stories were written is subtly implied in the treatment of particular themes that have persisted from the 1990s until the present day. This article will focus on one particular theme that arose in most of the prolific Sabahan short story writers, which is the conflict between the past and the present. The purpose of this research article is to trace the development of Sabah Malay literature through a thematic review of the short story genre from the 1980s to the 2000s with the intent to uncover changes in its thematic and narrative style that reflects the social and political changes not only in Sabah but in Malaysia. The findings will posit Sabah Malay literature, in particular the short story genre, within the development of the Malay literary canon in Malaysia.

WADAH

Wadah is a bi-annual literary magazine dedicated exclusively to publish short stories written by Sabahan writers. It is a special initiative by DBPCS as a

tool to promote greater involvement, growth of Malay and greater interest in Borneo (Sabah & Sarawak) Malay Literature. *Wadah* is also otherwise known as *Jendela Sabah* [Window to Sabah]. A process of assessment by editors is implemented to ensure the quality of each short story published. A Sabah literary prize was then introduced in 1989 to encourage further interest in Sabah Malay literature. The first issue of *Wadah* was published in October 1986 and remains in publication today. A great number of Sabahan Malay writers such as Azmah Nordin, Obasiah Usman, Mahmud Eddie, Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim, Asmiah Ajamain and Jasni Matlani, among others, have benefitted from their publications in this magazine, which has propelled or inspired their literary careers (Asmiaty, 2019).

In Sabah, Norsuhaila's (2016) scrutiny of short stories published in *Wadah* from the 1980s until the 2000s concluded that a majority of themes in these short stories written by authors such as Jasni Matlani, Azmah Nordin, Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim, Obasiah Hj Osman, A. Karim Kadir, Mad Sakiran, Kathirina Tati, Juri Durabi, Ruhaini Matdarin and Dayangku Mastura (2016) revolve around love, religion, trust, poverty, education, economics and politics. This article will show that there are subtle changes in their grasp of the themes, which can be widely seen as a conflict between the past and the present and represented in different social and political discourses embedded in modern literary narratives and symbols. Azmah Nordin's "Lumbai" (1987), Jonathan Kandok's "Mimpi Burubut" (1988), Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim's "Lapik Pinang" (1994), Kathrina Tahti's "Sogit" (2000), Juri Durabi's "Aur Sungai & Tebing" (2017) and Chacho Muhama's "Atap Nipah" (2017) are selected due to the recognized prominence of the writers and the numerous awards won from their respective stories.

CONCEPT OF "LOCAL COLOUR" AND "REGIONALISM" IN SABAHAN SHORT STORIES

After the American Civil War in 1865, the literature that appeared had specific details that included:

... an emphasis on the local, an interest in the exotic or unusual features of the region, detailed descriptions of the settings, the use of dialect, and the use of a shorter form of fiction- usually sketches or stories as opposed to novels ...

(Campbell, 2003, p. 93)

This description of the type of literature that emphasized and glorified the region that the writers inhabited paid special attention to the local dialects and customs or “local colour”; this was placed above the plot of their stories and hence became identified as “local colour literature”. This is named after the movement that spread over to Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Russia and other parts of Europe in the 19th century. The same emphasis on the local culture, practices and rituals as well as the use of local dialects are found in Sabahan short stories, 20 years after the merging of West and East Malaysia in 1963. Just as local colour literature was created after the American Civil War or the World Wars in Europe, these Sabahan short stories were interested in celebrating the customs and practices of the old world or the past. The messages found in their themes are projected in the characters who represented minorities such as “the poor, the ethnic minorities and the elderly...” (Rajput, 2016, p.3). This feature not only distinguished the Sabahan short story from the realism genre, regardless of its backdrop, but it places these short stories in a genre of its own known as “local colour”. “Local colour” is defined by Hamlin Garland as writing in which “the writer spontaneously reflects the life which goes on around him” that he claims is “natural and unsustained art” (quoted in Rajput, 2016, p. 6). Garland goes on to argue that the texture and quality of these writings is proof that it could only have been written by a native. Another criterion of local colour literature that is reflected in these early publications of short stories is their first appearance in local news dailies, followed by literary magazines (p. 34), as mentioned in the introduction.

The similarities between the local colour found in these Sabah short stories differ in the circumstances that evoked the rise of self-conscious writing; there was no war but a retreat of the British occupation in 1957, followed by the formation of Malaysia, which combined West Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak in 1963. In his study on the impact of census on a people’s identity, Toru Ueda (2006) reported that many of the 42 ethnic minorities who spoke 50 languages in Sabah were broadly acknowledged under the terms “Kadazan, Pribumi, Sabahan [and] Bumiputera [sons of the earth]” (p. 70). As Appadurai (1996, p. 133) observed in India under the British occupation in 1870, the process of taking census became a tool that homogenized the local Indians, leaving them easier to govern and control. The social impact of the 42 ethnic groups in Sabah is no different from the survivors of war who became self-conscious of the “new” identity, which included with it another language formalized by a new education policy beginning September 1969 (Mohd. Nor, 1982). This new policy

upheld Malay as the formal language of all government school curriculum. Regardless of whether they were Kadazandusun, Murut, Bajau, Brunei and many more, the ethnic people of Sabah, who are so diverse in cultural and language, were homogenously grouped as “native” during the British occupation and subsequently as “Bumiputera” (Toru Ueda, 2006). Their respective mother tongue, conditioned over time, has been replaced by Malay, as observed in Jane Wong Kon Ling’s (2012) research on the Sabah Malay dialect. A gradual “de-ethnicizing” or homogenizing of these different ethnic groups are tantamount to an erosion of the natural identity of a people, which is not necessarily caused by a physical war but socio-political policies and census, as demonstrated in the case of Sabah’s ethnic groups.

As such, the the penchant of Sabahan writers for emphasizing their particular ethnic identity through the elderly characters, the idealization of past customs and the focus on the descriptive elements of ethnic rituals or costumes resounds even in their short stories published 20 years after the first Malaysian census. The selected Sabahan short stories will be measured against the criteria of local colour literature, which exploits the customs, locality and identity of a people in a particular area, and also regional literature, which has a similar definition but with an addition of a realist slant. The plots of the Sabahan short stories revolve around romance, particularly romantic themes of love between a man and a woman, mores, affection, religion, belief, poverty, education, economy (Norsuhaila, 2016) and the encroachment of modernity into the idealistic village life. Often with simple and almost naive contextual aspects, the message that emerges is also pure and simple, as all local colour and regional literature should be. These works are written in the persuasive narrative styles, feature peripheral locations and quaint characters that are often in conflict with customs and rituals inspired by mythical backdrop and emphasize on the identity of a people particular to their culture and identity.

METHODOLOGY

In the quest to identify the type of short stories that have been written by Sabahan writers since the inception of formal short stories was published and acknowledged by the state literary body such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Cawangan Sabah (DBPCS) branch, which was established in 1963, this article will focus on a textual analysis of a selection of short stories published in *Wadah*. By utilizing a poststructuralist approach that

does not limit the analysis for meaning and truth, unlike structuralism, the limits on knowledge is represented by the “disruption(s) and change(s) in the core” (Williams, 2014, p. 3), allowing us to trace these overt changes “intranationally” (McKee, 2003, p. 8) in a particular genre of narrative in an interpretative framework. The analysis will focus on a similar theme running across the selection of short stories by Sabahan writers that have been consciously selected from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. The structural analysis involves the comparison of the treatment of the theme through the narrative structures of plot, character, conflict resolution and writing styles in creative writing. The comparison will yield an understanding of the type of Malay literature that emerged from the literary corpus in Sabah, East Malaysia. Observation of these changes in the narrative structure of a similar theme that runs through the short stories over the different time periods will also make apparent the literary genres favoured by Sabahan writers at different times in Sabah’s literary history, hinting at its social, economic and political influences.

ANALYSIS

The major theme that runs concurrently in the selected short stories selected is the erosion of the past due to the changes brought by modernity. While the theme was initially introduced in the mid-1980s from a nostalgic point of view through the bemoaning of loss of customs and rituals due to the ignorance or apathy of the younger generation, the treatment of the conflict and the ultimate resolution to the conflict in the theme of these short stories infer a wider polemics that are beyond the scope of local colour literature. As such, the subtle changes in Sabahan short stories is detected in the analysis of the changes in conflict resolution of the plot, theme and characterization.

Conflict

The conflict between culture and modernization that reverberates continuously through to the new millenium is personified in Kathrina Tahti’s “Sogit” (2000). Meanwhile, in Azmah Nordin’s “Lumbai”, the conflict is projected between the invisible forces of nature and the people and Lumbai, the gate-keeper of the customs and traditions of the Kadazadusun ethnic group of Sabah. Lumbai is trying her best to avoid the catastrophe that would befall the people, who are believed to be descended from the Nunuk Ragang, if the *basal* ritual is not observed (“Lumbai”, p.

13). Her son and his children, the two younger generations, do not view this ritual as important as they are consumed and distracted by the material wealth gained by their step-sister, Atun, who accuses Lumbai of being biased against her own flesh and blood. The death of Lumbai's posterity when the strong winds bring down the symbolic fig tree on their houses is a didactic foreshadowing of the misfortune that affirms the continuous practice of customs and traditions among the Kadazandusun. Similarly, Jonathan Kandok's "Mimpi Burubut" (1988) also warns of retribution if taboos are ignored; in this story, the titular character, Burubut, loses his family and his own life after he ignores the taboo to not work in his paddy fields if he had a dream the night before. His wife and newborn baby die in a gruesome manner and his house burns down with him trapped within. Kathrina Tahti's "Sogit" (2000) also highlights the lack of respect in the younger generation that has led to the corrosion of customs and traditions among the Kadazandusun people. The character, Inai Dodu, laments her daughter Melda's refusal to observe the old custom of *sogit* in her upcoming marriage.

However, the conflict is given a different resolution in "Atap Nipah" (2017) by Chacho Mohama. The conflict between modernity and tradition is reiterated through the conflict between Mak Iyah and her son, Jalal. The generational conflict is resolved by nature but without the foreshadow of catastrophe. In fact, it is the liberating forces of nature that tore away Mak Iyah's *nipah* roof, which she was adamant about not changing for the safer and stronger zinc roof. Even though Kathrina Tahti highlights the cause of the erosion of customs among the younger generation, she does not resolve her conflict with foreshadow. In "Sogit", despite Inai Dodu's pleas, her daughter, Melda, rejects the traditional ways of *sogit*, calling it *adat-adat lapuk* or customs that are outdated (2000, p. 2). The reiteration of similar conflicts between the old ways and the present, including changes in the conflict resolution by the writers from the 1980s to the new millennium, reveals a subtle change in the corpus of Sabah Malay literature across this period of time. While Azmah Nordin's "Lumbai" (1987) and Jonathan Kandok's "Mimpi Burubut" (1988) display resolutions that promote the preservation of customs and traditions through conflict and resolution, Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim's "Lapik Pinang" (1994) does the opposite. In the story, the second wife, Aisah, laments that the *lapik pinang* tradition of leaving a white cloth over a newlywed's bed to collect proof of the bride's virtue among the Bruneian ethnic is more detrimental than helpful to a marriage. The rejection of the ritual by the prospective groom in favour of

the silk he bought from China for his bride signifies changes to customs that liberate and promote happiness rather than lies.

Nostalgia versus modernity is an issue that pits the sentimentality of yearning for a past in a particular place and time (*Webster's Encyclopedia Dictionary*, 2001) against the changes brought by modernization; it is the social milieu where social issues are projected in the short stories. These are clearly depicted in the binary oppositions between the older generation and the younger generation ("Lumbai", 1987), nature and man ("Lumbai" & "Mimpi Burubut", 1988), mother and daughter ("Sogit", 2000) and son and mother ("Atap Nipah", 2017) by the respective writers. The objective to promote the rich cultural past in the evocation of the local cultural tropes such as costumes, locations and language is evident in local colour or regional literature. In "Lumbai" (1987), Azmah Nordin painstakingly describes in detail the whole *basal* and *patod* rituals (p. 13) in a local environment, transporting the reader to the particular location by using the original Kadazandusun words to evoke a particular locality and using the local dialect by the characters so as to highlight the social milieu particular to the represented people. Similarly, Jonathan Kandok, in "Mimpi Burubut" (1988), is just as detailed in describing the lifestyle and living of Burubut, the paddy farmer who eventually chooses to ignore the taboo that is implied, costing him and his family their lives. Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim, through "Lapik Pinang" (1994) written in the mid-1990s, also has a similar local colour approach in description, though there is a difference.

This change in the treatment of nostalgia by the different writers is again a result of social influences in the form of religion. With the establishment of Datu Mustapha from USNO as the Chief Minister of Sabah in 1967, there was rapid proselytizing of Islam as the formal religion of Sabah. This proselytization continued after the change of governance under Datuk Harris Salleh in 1985, where there was a political uproar against the aggressive conversion of ethnic Christian groups such as the Kadazandusun and Murut in the interior. The official majority rule of Muslims was confirmed with the entrance of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Sabah in 1992 until today (Asmiaty, 2019). Similar to the ethnic polarization within the Kadazandusun ethnic groups, the Sabahan writers divided themselves along religious lines, with the Kimaragang, Liwan, Tatana and Lotud ethnic groups belonging to the Christian faith under the leadership of their *Huguan Siou* (paramount leader) while the Bisaya, Bajau, Bugis and Tidong ethnic groups held onto their Islamic

beliefs. Consequently, aside from a self-conscious cultural disparity, Sabahan writers grappled with their sense of loss in terms of identity and the exhortation of their religious views embedded in the messages. This is obvious in Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim's short story "Lapik Pinang" (1994) in which Aisah's daughter rebels against her elder stepmother's suggestion to perform the traditional custom of *lapik pinang*, which tests the virtue of the bride. Aisah steps in to say, "*Adat itu bertentangan...bercanggah dengan hukum agama*" [Customs are contrary...against the teachings of our faith] (p. 21). While the story ends positively with the groom stepping in to affirm the departure of the old ways in favor of the new that is in accordance with the teachings of Islam, Kathrina Taiti's character, Inai Dodu, in her short story "Sogit" (2000) does not. Inai is heard dreading the consequences of her daughter's choice of getting married without the Kadazandusun customary rites in favor of a simpler marriage in a hotel. Melda is not in favor of the lavish over indulgence in liquor that a *kampung* marriage would entail compared to a ceremony at a hotel. Inai Dodu is then left with the fearsome task of explaining to her relatives the new developments of abandoning the past ways for the new.

While the plots of the earlier short stories end in favour of nostalgia, the later plots that may have similar plots and themes end with nostalgia's defeat. Lumbai, the titular character of Azmah Nordin's short story, is saved from the catastrophe that befalls her son and her grandchildren who are killed by the red fig tree that falls on the seven houses beneath the trees she was precariously pruning atop a ladder. The protagonist in Jonathan Kandok's "Mimpi Burubut" (1988) meets his fateful end in a burning house while trying to save his ailing wife after discovering that their newborn baby has been mauled to death by the house cat. The violent deaths of an entire family is implied to be the result of ignoring traditional harvest customs. The swift and cruel reprisal for thwarting a powerful adversary in the form of nature metaphorically implies the loss of present and future generations. However, Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim's main character, Aisah, who is a second wife, and her own daughter is "victorious" against the irreligious *lapik pinang* ritual, which is claimed to be against the teachings of Islam about the exhibition of a woman's virtue (p. 22). Kathrina Tahti's Inai Dodu in "Sogit" (2000) also loses her fight with her daughter, Melda, to observe the *sogit* ritual into her wedding.

It is important to note that the main characters in the earlier shorts stories are victorious in championing the past or else they die as a result of their disobedience. Conversely, the main characters in the short stories

written in the mid-1990s either fail in their mission to preserve their customs or are disappointed in their attempts against the minor characters such as Melda, Aisah's daughter as well as Aisah herself, all of whom are not "penalized" for disregarding or disrespecting the customs and rituals, unlike the minor characters in Azmah Nordin and Jonathan Kandok's short stories.

Although the short stories written in the new millennium also retain the theme of modernity versus traditional lifestyle, it is inferred in a wider and more general polemics. "Atap Nipah" (2017) by Chacho Mohama draws the reader into the lifestyle of the people living in a kampung on the fringes of Sabah, particularly to their manners and ways, which include physical manifestations of rural lifestyle that is typical of both local colour and regional writing. Mak Iyah lives in a house with a roof made of *nipah* leaves, which is a common cultural trope of traditional Malay houses. The traditional ways of Mak Iyah is presented without pretensions in simple prose and sentence structures. The conflict in the plot arises when Jalal, Mak Iyah's son, wants to replace the roof with zinc as he feels it would be more comfortable and reliable than the leaves. Disagreement ensues between the mother and son as their perceptions of the roof differ. To the mother, who resonates the character of the gatekeeper of past culture like Lumbai ("Lumbai", 1987), Elder Wife ("Lapik Pinang", 1994) and Inai Dodu ("Sogit", 2000), the house represents the legacy of a past she loved as it was built single-handedly by her late husband, Jalal's father. Jalal is not only incognizant about this fact but values safety and comfort over sentimental nostalgia. The conflict is resolved when the weather or nature decides for Mak Iyah. The monsoon season that regularly brings heavy rain and strong winds causing massive floods arrives and Mak Iyah's damaged *nipah* roof is unceremoniously replaced by zinc. Nature personified appears to be victorious and has changed from siding with the nostalgic past ("Lumbai" & "Mimpi Burubut") to become the voice of logical modernization. Aisah, the second wife in "Lapik Pinang" (1994) who worries about the *lapik pinang* ritual that will expose her daughter's virtue on the latter's wedding night, suggests another force that has brought about changes. In spite of the Elder wife's vehemence in proceeding with the ritual which she claims cannot be left out, Aisah objects to the ritual on the basis of it being against the teachings of Islam (p.22) and its consequences, which often highlight the evil side of man and the lies that married couples resort to in order to keep their pride. Ultimately, the white cloth is rejected by the groom, who takes the decision away from both

Aisah and her daughter on the wedding day. The groom asserts that the sanctity of the first night of marriage belongs to the individuals involved. Both resolutions to the conflict suggest the change in perception towards the past of the authors and the influence of other elements such as religion and logic of the modern present.

The nostalgia of a house with *nipah* leaves and the romanticization of the value customs personified by the house definitely locates “Atap Nipah” (2017) in the mould of local colour. However, the polemics of conventionality versus modernity played out in the theme of nostalgia through the conflict between the two generations hints more toward a regional literature that emphasizes the value of customs pertaining to identity rather than any other form of aesthetics. There is an obvious bareness in description in “Atap Nipah” when compared to earlier short stories such as “Lumbai” (1987), “Mimpi Burubut” (1988) and “Lapik Pinang” (1994). There is also an absence of detail or the evocation of traditional customs, rituals or even the essence of locality that is distinct in the three earlier short stories. Characters such as Mak Iyah and Jalal are but personifications of an intellectual debate between the sentimental nostalgia reflected in the *nipah* roof—the last remaining memory of Mak Iyah’s husband, who is also Jalal’s father—and the bare zinc roof. The debate between sentimentalism and modernity is metaphorically implied through the personification of the *nipah* roof, which is a symbol of Malay identity that modernity neglects. In describing “regionalism”, Anthony Milner, in his article entitled “Regionalism in Asia” (2016), refers to a second perspective of the term that includes identity issues that are interested in highlighting how to identify a particular region rather than an ethnic group. Chacho Mohama’s “Atap Nipah” (2017) has obviously provided a rich geographical backdrop of monsoon rain and a discussion of a general Malay identity polemics through the physical personification of Malay cultural heritage in the *nipah* roof house rather than the ethnic polemics of the past and the present, as seen in the earlier short stories.

Narrative Technique

From the 1980s until the early new millennium, the narrative technique is undeniably realistic whereby customs, dialects, costumes, landscape and thoughts appear to be peculiar to the Sabah location or ethnic group rather than a general inclusive identity. “Lumbai” (1987), “Mimpi Burubut”

(1988), “Lapik Pinang” (1994) and “Sogit” (2000) is peppered with local characters, symbols and metaphors in graphic abundance such as: the mystical red *fig tree*, which is tied to the legend of the *nunuk ragang* in “Lumbai” (1987); Lumbai’s bobolian costume, signaling her “spiritual mother” role for the ritual during which she is perched symbolically on a traditional bamboo ladder and prepares animal sacrifices for the spirits to ensure the wellbeing of her family; Burubut in his paddy-ripen farm, tempting him to ignore superstition in favour of harvesting the paddy before it is too late; the elaborate Bruneian weddings (“Lapik Pinang”, 1994) filled with customs and rituals prior to the wedding day; and also the custom of *sogit* in a Kadazandusun marriage (Katrina Tahti, 2000). Literature described as “local colour” often adopts the third-person narrative whereby the author is an intermediary who guides the reader through the plot and the message of the story. The autonomy of the author over the reading experience and meaning generated is prevalent in the mid-1980s and 1990s short story but is startlingly absent in the new millennium short story. While local knowledge, creativity and imagination is amalgamated through simple plot structures in simple descriptive language and with customs, dialect, costumes, rituals and taboos highlighted through a nostalgic narrative in the earlier short stories, the new millennium short story is a combination of intellectual and philosophical debate.

Juri Durabi’s award-winning short story, “Aur dan Tebing” (2017), published in *Dewan Sastera* as part of another project to encourage the growth of Malay literary works nationwide, directly contrasts the previous narrative techniques adopted in the earlier short stories. This story comprises a postmodern allegorical style of personified characters that carry the narrative through a plot less inanimate debate between the local bamboo growing beside river and the bank of a river. The derivation from the local Malay proverb “*bagai aur dengan tebing*”, which implies “helping one another regardless”, is the theme manifested through a philosophical debate on binding relationships such as the past and the present, the old and the new, between friends, husbands and wives, co-workers and family in relation to society, economy and local politics, with a climax at the entrance of the “outsider”, personified by the river and its current, which threatens to completely destroy any relationship if nothing is done to stop it. The local norms and mores is imbued in the implicit message about betrayal, accusation, loyalty and distrust, all of which are the “waves” brought by the personified “outside” river that threatens these binding relationships. “Aur and Tebing” (2017) is completely incongruent

to the narrative technique and structure of the earlier Sabahan short stories, leaving readers without a doubt that it is neither literature of local colour nor striving to be regional. Instead, it rather strikingly turns out to be hypothetical by deliberately delivering an opinion and feelings that are satirical or metaphorical without being didactic or insolent. Using the geographical semiotics of ecological disasters due to soil erosion and the increasing threat of pollution or flooding to the ecology of the land, Juri Durabi has revealed a new aspect of Sabahan writers who have moved away from a conventional local colour or regional writing.

CONCLUSION

The scrutiny of the changes in thematic treatments and narrative styles in Sabahan Malay short stories have only affirmed Janet Wolff's theory of art production mediation, which is further improved by Ungku Maimunah's claim that art mediation includes a wider scope of social, cultural and political influences on fiction. Sabahan writers produced "local colour" works because the British occupation of Sabah and the subsequent unification between West and East Malaysia led to the gradual loss of identity among its 42 ethnic groups. Through the political manoeuvres between political parties that had different majority ethnics and were divided along the two main religious groups, the social policies that led to a single language holding sway has impacted and guided the growth of Malay literature in Sabah. The change in literary discourse is revealed in the treatment of the single broad theme of the past versus the present, which is interpreted as a loss of ethnic customs and traditions in the earliest Sabahan short stories written in the 1980s, later evolving into issues of modernity versus conventionality in the 1990s and, finally, into a logic and religion versus immorality and unconformity in the new millennium. The different tropes, characterization and emphasis on location as well as conflict resolutions hint at a different category of literature, beginning with local colour nostalgia at the inception, followed by a regional concern with national identity and, finally, a diversity that emphasizes on the philosophy of individuality in the new millennium. These findings are relevant in order to understand the direction of literary growth in Sabah Malay literature in view of future research into the influence and influencers of Sabah Malay literature.

REFERENCES

- Anthony Milner. (2016). *Regionalism in Asia in the Far East and Australasia*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Appadurai A. (1996). Number in the Colonial Imagination. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Asmiaty Amat. (2010). *Mediasi Perkembangan Novel di Sabah* (Doctoral dissertation). Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya.
- Asmiaty Amat. (2019). *Mediasi dalam perkembangan novel Sabah*. Penerbit UMS: Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Azmah Nordin. (1987, December). Lumbai. *Wadah*, 12-14. Dewan Bahasa Pustaka Sabah,
- Chacho Mohama. (2017, November). Atap Nipah. *Wadah*. Dewan Bahasa Pustaka Sabah.
- Campbell, Donna. (2003). *Realism in regionalism*. Blackwell:
- Combrink, Hans J. B., Soderberg, C., Boutin, M E. & Boutin, A. Y. (2008). Indigenous Group of Sabah: An Annotated Bibliography of Linguistic & Anthropological Sources. (Part 2 Ethnic Group Index & Topical Index). SIL International: The Natural History Publication (Borneo) Sdn. Bhd.
- Dayangku Mastura. (2016). *Kumpulan Cerpen Harum Kasih Daun Irik*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Garland, Hamlin (1894). Crumbling Idols. Stone and Kimball qtd. Rajput, Vandana. *No Place Like Home Regionalism in the Novels of Amit Chaudhuri* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Jammu. 31.10.2016. pp. 270. Retrieved from <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/167296/5/06.%20chapter%201.pdf>
- Intan Siti Azierah Gi @ Sitti Rahman G. Ibrahim. (1994, December). Lapik Pinang. *Wadah*. Kota Kinabalu: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah.
- Interview. Kasima Salinri. Teluk Likas. Kota Kinabalu. Perancang Bahasa. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah. 7 May 2015.
- Ismail Abbas. (1995). 50 Tahun Perkembangan dan Pengembangan Sastra. *Wadah* Vol. Mac Dewan Bahasa Pustaka Sabah. pp. 3- 9.
- Ismail Abbas, Othman Puteh & Suhaibun Yussuf. (1995). *Kumpulan Esei Perkembangan Cerpen di Sabah*. Kota Kinabalu: Dewan Bahasa Pustaka Sabah.
- Jonathan Kandok. (1988, December). Mimpi Bumbut. *Wadah*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah.
- Juri Durabi. (2017). Aur sungai & tebing. *Dewan Sastra*, 1, 81-84. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Sabah.
- Kathirina Tati. (2012). *Kumpulan Cerpen Tangis Buliga*. Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia.

- Mckee, Alan. (2003). *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd.: London.
- Mohd. Nor Long. (1982). *Perkembangan Pelajaran di Sabah*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Museum Sabah. (2007). *Kumpulan-kumpulan Etnik Peribumi di Sabah*. Kota Kinabalu: Museum Sabah.
- Norsuhaila Sulaiman. (2016). *Cerpen-cerpen WADAH 1987-2013: Satu Analisis Struktural* (Master's thesis). Sabah: Fakulti Kemanusiaan Seni dan Warisan, Universiti Malaysia Sabah.
- Rajput, Vandana. (2016). *No Place Like Home Regionalism in the Novels of Amit Chaudhuri* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Jammu. 31.10.2016. pp. 270. Retrieved from <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/167296/5/06.%20chapter%201.pdf>
- Sabah Department of Statistics. (2011). Retrieved from https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/come&menu_id=dTZ0K2o4YXgrSDRtaEJyVmZ1R2h5dz09 (20 Sept 2019)
- Sabihah Osman (1986). Perkembangan Politik Sabah. Hairi Abdullah *et al.* (Eds.), *Sabah Perubahan dalam Pembangunan*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Ueda, Toru. (2006, January). Formation and Changes of the Native Concept in North Borneo during the Colonial Period. *Akademika*. 68, 65-89.
- Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir. (1997). Kaedah integrasi dalam kajian sastera. Mana Sikana (Ed.). *Teori sastera dan budaya dalam kajian akademik*. Bangi: Faculty of Social Science & Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Williams, James. (2014). *Understanding Poststructuralism*. Routledge: London.
- Wong, Jane Kon Ling. (2012). *The Sabah Malay dialect: A phonological study of the urban dialect of Kota Kinabalu city* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://studentsrepo.um.edu.my/5575/>
- Wolff, Janet. (1993). *The Social Production of art*. 2nd. Ed. London: Macmillan.
- Zahba Selamat, Ismail Haji Ibrahim, Rohayah Abdul Hamid. (1989). *Perkembangan Cerpen Sabah*. Sabah: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Received: 16 July 2019

Accepted: 2 November 2019